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# Conscience: A Very Short Introduction

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# **Conscience A Very Short Introduction**

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**Paul Strohm**

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# Introduction

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The variable yet durable phenomenon called conscience has outlasted epochs and empires, credos and creeds, and has influenced human behaviour for 2,000 years and more. The Romans identified it (and named it: *conscientia*). The early Christians appropriated it. Reformation Protestants and loyal Catholics relied equally upon its advice and admonition. In the 17th and 18th centuries, it re-crossed the religious/secular divide, shifting attention from religious perfection to ethical and social betterment. Today, it is embraced with equal conviction by non-religious and religious alike. It enjoys a privileged place in theology and devotion, but no less in art and philosophy. Politicians claim to act on its behalf, and occasionally do. Equally striking is its breadth of appeal among all kinds and classes of persons: a subject of rarified academic inquiry that works at street level too, and is confidently cited by people in all walks of life as a basis for their actions.

Conscience's astonishing persistence might seem to suggest that it is a fixed entity, a unitary perspective unchanged across time. In fact, conscience lives in time and its most prepossessing trait is a capacity for constant self-modification and adaptation to new circumstances, a limitless responsiveness to new and urgent conditions of relevance. In this *Very Short Introduction*, I will treat conscience not as an unvarying constant, but as a feat of human invention with a distinctive and eventful history all its own.

Conscience refuses any settled or unvarying content. It can justify generous self-sacrifice, but selfish individualism as well. It can motivate an act of charity or an act of terror. The dictates of conscience can be Christian or pagan, divinely based or resolutely secular, selfishly nationalistic or generously international. Even its gender remains uncertain: conscience may be male or female, a disembodied voice or a parental one, may even speak in chorus as public opinion. Equally variable with regard to source and location, conscience may be heard as a prompting voice within or as a commanding voice from without, and often both at once: an uncanny presence which knows everything about us yet retains an outside loyalty, whether to a deity or to the common good. Excellent things and some terrible things have been done in its name; much reasoned social betterment and occasional mad exceptionalism.

Conscience is, perhaps by definition, inconvenient. The individual visited by conscience usually feels, at least initially, that he or she was doing fine without it. Moreover, if conscience is variable with respect to its location or its content, some elements of what might be called its 'personality' remain distressingly the same. Wherever and whenever encountered, its characteristic habit is to goad, prick, wheedle, denounce, and harass rather than to mollify or assuage. If popular, it remains one of the least ingratiating of popular phenomena. The question, then, is why we need such an unpredictable and demanding and awkwardly stringent concept in our lives at all. The answer I will give is that we're far, far better off with conscience than without it.

Such an answer is best attempted, though, after more sustained thought about where conscience came from, who has sponsored it, and what it has meant to successive generations of people. It has deep

historical roots, and renews and replenishes itself from those roots. Its best hope for future survival lies in an appreciation of this 'root system', consisting in all the things conscience has ever meant and been, as a basis for continuing and urgent applicability to the world today.

## The cultural geography of conscience

Conscience has influenced persons of stature throughout the world, from the founders of the American republic through Gandhi and Mandela and beyond, but its origins (and still, to some extent, its sponsorship) are European and European-derived.

The West has no monopoly on ethical self-scrutiny or principled inner rejection of ethically repugnant behaviour. Certainly, all languages and all societies possess their own, distinctive conceptions of duty or responsibility, or shame about failure to meet the standards of the society or the self. Even though ancient Hebrew had no word or exact equivalent for conscience itself, Hebrew theology has gotten along perfectly well on concepts of will and intent and moral duty and responsibility before a God who implants precepts in the heart of the believer (Deuteronomy 30:14, Jeremiah 31:33). Although separate in origin, such Hebrew concepts as the divine injunction to moral self-scrutiny and the lodging of a moral faculty within the body have been indispensable to the development of Christian conscience and have served it as a conditioning influence and an absent cause. (Further enriching this exchange, Modern Hebrew now includes the word *matzpun*, which draws close to conscience in its etymological associations with interiority and also with the Hebrew word for 'compass'.) Greek *syneidesis*, an inherent and interior quality of ethical discernment, has traits in common with Christian conscience, and can indeed share with conscience a reflexive sense of self-knowledge, or knowledge of self by self. Buddhist and Hindu equivalents come closer to what modern English calls 'consciousness' than to 'conscience', but these were indivisible concepts in English until the 17th century, and sometimes thereafter. Conscience in Russian is *sovest*, a borrowing from Greek via Old Church Slavonic, and shares with conscience a sense of mutual knowing, either as self-reflexive awareness of knowing with another – etymologically, one may compare *con* (mutual) + *scientia* (knowledge) and *so* - (with) + *vest* (knowledge). Confucian concepts of *liangxin* (well-disposed feelings of heart/mind) and *liang zhi* (good moral thought or discernment) are tantalizingly similar to conscience in their emphasis on self-regulation and have enriched discussions of conscience in the 20th century. Arabic possesses the concept of *al-zaājir*, or 'the restrainer', defined as 'God's preaching in the heart of the believer, the light cast therein which summons him to the truth', similar to conscience in its emphasis on prohibition of wrongdoing.

A medieval proverb describes 'many roads to Compostella', and these varied systems remind us that the goal of ethical self-scrutiny occurs outside as well as inside the tradition of conscience. Although operating similarly to conscience, these alternative systems are not its identical twins; each possesses subtleties and traditional differences that reward study in their own right. An earlier and patronizing Western liberalism offhandedly assumed that global ethical systems could be seamlessly identified with conscience, and that no significant differences need be acknowledged. Yet this turns out, especially in the context of proposed declarations of international conscience, or proposed intercultural initiatives to be taken in the name of 'conscience', not precisely to be the case. Cross-cultural respect is less well served by casual assertions of similarity than by appreciative attention to the distinctive features of each system.

A truly international comparatism is, of course, beyond the scope of this study, and beyond the limits of its author's knowledge. This study will focus on the particular traditions of conscience as it has developed over 2,000 years in the West. At *its* best and *our* best, conscience deserves its reputation as one of the prouder Western contributions to human dignity. It stands, as theologian Henry Chadwick once commented, as a bulwark 'against the trivialisation of man'. As embodied in documents like the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and as carried forward by organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, it has much to offer to the discussion of human rights throughout the world. But, if it is to be considered for promulgation to other languages and cultures, then a sense of its historical development – including its abuses, blindspots, and contradictions – will encourage the proper humility with which to present this concept to others.

# Chapter 1

## Christian conscience

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### The pagan inheritance

Swiftly and seamlessly embraced by the early church, conscience is often thought to be Christian in its origins. But Latin *conscientia* was already a flourishing concept in Roman persuasive oratory and legal pleading well before the birth of Christ. Roman conscience gave texture and imagery to early Christian ideas of conscience, and many of its attributes would inform both Catholic and Protestant conceptions of conscience. Carried forward within these conceptions, it remains influential in views of conscience today.

The foundation of Classical conscience was public or social opinion. People at odds with public opinion or social consensus found themselves vulnerable to the accusations of conscience and to conscience's pangs. Cicero, in public address, enlisted and swayed opinion by weaving conscience into his arguments on behalf of clients and his denunciations of the guilty and proud. Conscience is, he says in *Pro Milo*, the principal theatre of virtue (*theatrum virtuti*), and one performs in that theatre for good or ill. His client Milo has come forward freely, he says, because the strength of conscience sustains him, even as it haunts those who have erred with visions of punishment. A good conscience, he suggests, can be a basis for legal acquittal. As for bad conscience, it joins legal sanction to punish those who have offended public standards. Forget about Furies, he says in *Pro Sexto Roscio*; the guilty torment themselves with the thought of their own evil deeds: each is harassed and maddened by the knowledge of his crime, terrified by his thoughts and his bad conscience. The forensic orator Quintilian argues that those who stray from the path of virtue suffer twice over, from the penalties of the law and, invariably, those of bad conscience (*semper vero malae conscientiae*). In his 1st-century BC *Civil Wars*, Julius Caesar tells of corrupt officers who suffer the opprobrium of their familiars, and also internally in conscience of mind or spirit (*animi conscientia*). And Cicero again, speaking of Caesar in his *De Officiis*, exclaims, 'What stains of conscience [*conscientiae labes*] do you suppose he had, what wounds to his spirit?' So familiar are conscience's traits that a contemporary rhetorical handbook, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, advises the prosecutor to say that his adversary has displayed the signs of conscience, or *signa conscientiae*: that he was seen to have blushed, grown pale, stammered, spoken inconsistently, displayed uncertainty, compromised himself.

This language of conscience – including its capacity to cajole, to wound, to mark or stain – has a familiar ring to it, for conscience is already up to its 2,000-year endeavour of harassing the bad and upholding the good, and visiting pain, terror, pallor, and trepidation upon those who ignore its strictures. This language and imagery were well suited to the emergent Christian religion, faced with multiple tasks of converting the hesitant, disciplining new believers, and encouraging self-vigilance and personal reform within its ranks. Already proven as a spur to action and an incentive to life-change, conscience was conveniently adaptable to Christian aspirations and needs. No wonder it was embraced and elaborated with such zest that it became an early and crucial component of the Christian

---

## Catholicism and conscience

The crucial event for the Christian appropriation of conscience was Jerome's choice of the Latin *conscientia* in his late 4th-century translation of the New Testament from Greek to Latin. In the Greek testament, Paul's Epistles rely upon the term *syneidesis*, a broadly inclusive term which anticipates *conscientia* in its suggestion of mutual knowing, or a knowing by the self 'that knows with itself'. By translating the noun *syneidesis* as *conscientia*, Jerome introduced it at one stroke as a crucial category of Christian self-understanding. The two terms are not, of course, precisely equivalent. In choosing *conscientia*, Jerome could not avoid certain of its previously formed connotations. For one thing, the pre-history of *conscientia* connected it inevitably to public expectation and the public sphere. While *syneidesis* was an inner quality, inherent in the individual, *conscientia* was a term that looked, Janus-faced, in two directions: inwardly, to be sure, but also outwardly, as in Ciceronian and Classical-legal understanding, to public opinion and shared values. The character of biblical and Christian conscience was thus mixed at its very inception, combining principles of private ethical discernment with public expectation. This fusion – or one might say potential confusion – of the internal and the external forums meant that Christian conscience would always potentially serve two masters: its possessor or subject, on the one hand, and the doctrinal or theological views of its ecclesiastical sponsor, on the other.

The formulations of conscience in Paul's Epistles, as carried forward to the West in Jerome's Latin translation, would remain as touchstones, and also as occasions of debate, throughout subsequent Christian history. The most influential of all occurs in Romans 2:14–16, in which Paul explains that the Jews are governed by their laws, but that Gentiles or Christians are a law unto themselves, and show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience rendering testimony to them (*ostendunt opus legis scriptum in cordibus suis testimonium reddente illis conscientia ipsorum*). Paul's conscience is thus very intimate to the individual who possesses it; a direct and personal gift from God to the believer – a view that would become increasingly important to the rise of various early modern protestantisms. Yet his conscience also plays a more public and judicial role, adjudicating between various thoughts and, finally, testifying before God at the Day of Judgement.

Crucial elements of the late Christian conscience are already on view in St Augustine of Hippo's late 4th-century account of his conversion to the Christian religion. Augustine was born a pagan, trained in classical literature and philosophy, and flirted with various systems of belief before converting to Christianity and assuming his mandate as one of the Fathers of the Roman Church. In his 397–8 *Confessions*, he describes his path to Christian conversion, a path involving a good deal of diversion and delay. Even after a number of his friends have converted, he hesitates, awaiting certainty about his choice. In this state, he is addressed by his own conscience, a conscience already aroused over his unnecessary delay:

The day had come when I should be naked to myself and my conscience [*conscientia mea*] mutter within me: 'Where is my tongue? Indeed you kept saying how that you would not cast off the burden of vanity for an uncertain truth. Behold, matters are now certain, and you are still burdened. And they are receiving wings on freer shoulders, others who have neither so

worn themselves down in seeking nor spent ten years and more thinking about it.' Thus I was inwardly gnawed and violently confused with horrible shame.

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Conscience speaks from a position shared with the self, but incorporates elements and perspectives external to the self. A decisive key to the ambivalence of conscience's location and behaviour rests in the etymology of the Latin word itself: as *con* + *scientia*; *scientia* as knowledge, but knowledge held *con*, or 'together with' or 'in common'. Conscience is knowledge of oneself, but also knowledge held together with another or others, or, reflexively, knowledge of oneself by oneself. Consequently, conscience appears to speak from within as interior knowledge – knowledge felt *intus*, or inwardly – but shows definite marks of a more expansive exterior knowledge as well. It is alert, for example, to what 'others' are doing and have done, to the fact that many of Augustine's associates have already converted.

Conscience's 'personality', marked by impatience and even a touch of irascibility, is already well formed. Although intimate with Augustine, it is hardly an enabler or abettor. It is a voice of 'loyal opposition', loyal but strenuous too. A subsequent sense of mutter or *increpare* is to 'chide', and Augustine's conscience does plenty of that. Assailing Augustine for his spiritual prevarication, it displays an ability to 'gnaw' at him and to stir *pudor*, or shame – attributes of conscience which persist to this day. Its arsenal of characteristic devices includes not only incessant nagging, but also cruel parody of Augustine's own hesitations and rationalizations. The best we can say for conscience is that its impetus is affirmative, and bent on self-improvement. Its voice is action-seeking, and it will not fall silent until it has achieved its goals.

Why does Augustine tolerate this finicky and ultimately implacable co-presence? In part because it is already there, already inside the gates of the self, and must in any case be reckoned with. And also in part because it bears special knowledge and authority, of a broader sort; superior knowledge that must be taken into account. To put it differently: conscience knows everything Augustine knows (everything about his ten years of prevarication and delay) and also knows more besides (everything about the superior character of Christian knowledge and the better use Augustine's friends have been making of their time). Taking full advantage of this superior strategic location – at the boundary of the self and the other – conscience is well suited to hail Augustine into a new stage of awareness about himself and the choices he has been making in the world.

In this protean form, early Christian conscience was bequeathed to subsequent generations, in the period we now call the Middle Ages, when, under the sponsorship of the Church, it both flourished and elaborated some of its most productive inconsistencies. As a voice straddling the inner and the outer, it is alternately friend and foe, at some times supportively encouraging and at other times harshly corrective. It knows one's worst foibles, but it addresses them within broadly entertained and rationally accessible norms. It simultaneously institutes a strengthened sense of selfhood, on the one hand, and a permanent division of that self between private inclination and public consensus, on the other. Already mixed – and in this sense both vital and unstable – at its point of inception, Christian conscience was thus guaranteed a long subsequent history of enormous influence and endless doctrinal contention.

In one respect, however, the union of Church and conscience in the medieval period had a stabilizing effect. For the first time, rather than shifting with the tides of situation and public opinion, conscience was furnished with a secure body of content in the form of Christian theology, biblical precedent, and

institutional practice. Medieval conscience retains its capacity to speak within, and to address the inner person, but need not in most cases wonder about what to say.

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This state of affairs, in which conscience ‘arrives’ already bearing information about right conduct and belief, is captured in one of the fuller medieval treatments of the subject, Benedictine monk Peter of Celle’s *On Conscience*. There, a magnificent banquet hall is prepared, but the chief guest has not yet arrived:

Imagine a table filled with a variety and abundance of different dishes/Let everything be arranged in perfect order, so that nothing is wanting in elegance, nothing is superfluous or boring. For the time being, however, let the most spacious and beautiful place, specially prepared for the queen and mistress of the house, remain empty ... Finally there comes the woman at whose beauty the sun and moon are in awe, and as she sits down the doors are closed and the wedding feast has a full complement of guests. The mystical cases of scrolls ... declare her name to the royal court: this lady is called ‘Conscience’.

Dispatched by God to the receptive Christian soul, conscience does not come empty-handed. She bears cases of scrolls which not only contain her identity papers and charge, but also the contents of her well-stocked chamber. These contents, here and elsewhere, consist of views generally held and widely known: collective witness of saints and confessors, councils and synods, authorized commentary upon Latin scripture.

Similar observations may be made of the medieval English classics of conscience. The vivid title of *Ayenbite of Inwyt* (or ‘Repeated Gnawing of Conscience’) suggests a kind of self-generated guilt within, but the body of the text consists mainly in the enumeration of those external and consensual features of penance by which *all* Christians may regulate their lives: God’s Commandments, the seven deadly sins and their branches, the rules of holy life, the *pater noster*, the cardinal virtues, the practice of shrift. Conscience, or *inwit*, arises only incidentally, as a by-product of good shrift, at which point the penitent will measure his own experience against the general tenets of the Church and will, in consequence, experience great sorrow, ‘and often wet his bed with tears’. Despite the implication of its editorially assigned title, the 14th to 15th-century *Pricke of Conscience* is actually less an anatomy of an individual or singular conscience than a treatise on consensually known doctrine (the fear of death, hell, purgatory, the signs of judgement, the last things, and the rewards of heaven). Conscience is mentioned only incidentally in the poem, once as one of the fifteen accusers (along with devils, angels, martyrs, and so on) who will appear to testify against the wicked at the time of judgement, and once as one of the fourteen pains of hell (along with cold, hunger, and so on). Conscience will indeed, as always, cause individual and very particular discomfort – will ‘gnaw’ and ‘bite as vermin’ – but its contents are universally shared out and nonspecific to the remorseful individual.

I certainly don’t want to engage in sterile generalizations about the Middle Ages as a period of monolithic faith, because medieval conscience is itself a highly motile and flexible concept, and, even if the contours of its advice are generally predictable, all the familiar and conflicted issues of practical application remain. The depth and variety of medieval thinking about conscience may be illustrated in the case of a major 14th-century poem, William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*. The poem is an allegory in which the central character, Will, is a person faced, as his name would indicate, with difficult and challenging issues of discernment and choice. Many of the characters of the poem, including Conscience (the only character present throughout most of the books of the poem), represent attributes

stationed both within and outside Will's mind. Conscience – now male, for he/she is a constant gender shifter – interacts with Will in a variety of ways, some too richly complex to be detailed here. His main responsibility is to sermonize Will, lecturing him about matters of doctrine that he should know and enact in his personal conduct. His advice thus consists mainly of common knowledge: things generally known, that every Christian should know, by which Will should guide his life and conduct. He is variously portrayed as keeper, counsellor, and guide, and Reason, his constant companion, abets and channels his enterprise.

Conscience, who earns a capital 'C' from some medieval scribes and all modern editors for his generalized character, cannot, however, be written off as two-dimensional. Part of his interest rests in his situation, both within and outside Will's mind. A voice in Will's head, he is also a serious player in the world. The official and public nature of his duties is emphasized in his various capacities and titles: he is a counsellor, guide, and holds office as constable of the castle of Unity. These worldly involvements lead him into repeated difficulty. Forced to make decisions in a compromised public sphere, he reveals fallibilities which might otherwise have gone unsuspected. He draws up a questionable guest list, including a pompous Doctor of Divinity, for a dinner party and finally needs to clear his head by walking out on his own guests; we see him besieged by external foes at the poem's end; and, despite warnings to the contrary, he makes the disastrous mistake of admitting Friars to the castle of Unity. The poem's ending suggests that he might be better off turning down some of his jobs and making his way in a less institutional capacity, as wayfarer and pilgrim in the world. But, within the poem as we have it, Conscience has no choice but to grapple with flawed alternatives as he enacts his higher responsibility as an arbiter of Christian consensus.

Thus, in Langland's poem, Conscience stimulates constant issues of interpretation and application. But, even though Conscience may be temporarily bested, or may err in matters of particular choice, he never stumbles into outright doctrinal error, never defends deviant or idiosyncratic opinions formed outside the Church. Aquinas and other analysts would recognize the possibility of a heretical or erroneous conscience, but in most daily applications medieval conscience remains orthodox and well-intentioned.

The familiar modern idea that conscience might stand alone, against every recognized authority, has yet to take full shape. Necessary to that shift is the conception of a private, internal conscience which may pit itself against a public or official Conscience. This shift is often associated with Martin Luther and the rise of Protestantism, yet its earliest signs may be found in the late medieval period, and even within the later versions of Langland's poem. *Piers Plowman* was composed in stages from the 1360s until the later 1380s, and its final version, known as the 'C' text, includes an insertion in which Will (now more closely associated than ever before with the authorial William Langland) is assigned a personal, as well as a general, conscience. More interestingly still, his personal conscience and his allegorical Conscience find themselves at debate. In this passage, Will is accused by Reason and Conscience of leading a spiritually dissolute or unproductive life. This occurs in a passage added to the beginning of the poem's fifth section, with Reason and Conscience challenging Will's layabout ways. Will replies (*to Conscience!*) that:

...in my consience y knowe what Crist wolde [wishes] y wrouhte. Preyers of a parfit man and penaunce discret Is the leueste [most precious] labour that oure lord pleseth.

Conscience is unimpressed with Will's explanation that his personal conscience is compatible with h

customary pursuits of offering prayers for wealthy patrons and performing penance now and then. In this passage, Conscience (as shared or collective entity) overrules Will's conscience (or personal sense of right and wrong) – but the very fact that institutional Conscience and personal conscience can fall into debate is tellingly predictive. Will's 'own' small-c conscience doesn't have anything terribly original to say; in fact, Conscience finds his remark obvious and superficial and angrily brushes it aside, and certainly Conscience prevails in the end. Nevertheless, this exchange between conscience and Conscience adumbrates a situation that would be more frequently seen in the 15th century and then become prevalent in the 16th century, in which a difference arises between an individual conscience and a more broadly held and institutionally supported view of Conscience. This difference might, in the late 14th-century version of *Piers Plowman*, be thought of as a kind of conceptual or potential space, an opening not yet filled by a really personal or ambitiously revisionary conscience, but within which such a personalized conscience might develop and thrive.

Will's appeal to personal conscience arises in a situation of duress, a situation in which he finds himself heavily pressed by Reason and Conscience. This is understandable. A character pressured by superior authority – and especially spiritual or religious authority – needs some kind of resort or fallback, and the resort to a personal conscience opens, at least, a small area of discretionary counterargument. The 14th and 15th centuries in England, and also on the Continent, saw a multiplication of personal and doctrinal challenges to the institutional Church (some of which, like Langland's, sought modest revision of its practices, and others of which may be regarded as forebear of 16th-century Protestant disaffection). Individuals caught up in these challenges would find increasing solace in the idea of a personal rather than institutionally supervised conscience.

Although some orthodox writers of the 14th century, such as the vernacular theologian Walter Hilton and political factionalist Thomas Usk, appeal to concepts of personal conscience, the richest source of such appeals is to be found in the writings of theologian John Wyclif and his Lollard followers. These religious dissidents of the 14th and 15th centuries raised many issues that would be prominent in the 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Wyclif, pressed on every front by ecclesiastical authority on issues which would lead eventually to formal condemnation (and to the exhumation and burning of his body), argued in his Sermon 49 that individual Christians ought better to judge merit *in their own conscience* than relying upon the views of others, and went on to declare: the final forum of merit 'rests in my own conscience' (*'in consciencia mea propria stabilitur'*). His text for this sermon was, tellingly, and, in the light of subsequent history, predictively, from Galatians 6:5: 'each one will carry his own burden' (*'unusquisque onus suum portabit'*).

But the first decades of the 16th century were the moment at which a newly individualized view of conscience became prominent in England, and an opening wedge of this transformation may be found in the behaviour of two oddly matched adversaries.

## **Henry VIII and Chancellor More**

To say that a *wholly* new view of conscience emerged in the 16th century would undervalue the subtlety and diversity of more than a millennium of previous consideration, and would underrate the unevenness with which such changes occur. Even so, marked new currents gain ascendance in the 16th century. Propelled by evangelical theology, with its emphasis on direct communication with God and

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